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Time for memory: Beyond spatial metaphors?

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Abstract

This article is a continuous dialogue on memory triggered by Brockmeier's article (2010). I drift away from the conventionalisation of the archive as a spatial metaphor for memory in order to consider the greater possibility of 'time' for conceptualising memory. The concept of time is central to understanding the nature of human experience as a process in which a constant flux of change in organism, cultural and social practices is observed. Two categories of time have been explored, firstly Aristotelian, physical time for an experimental paradigm and secondly, the way in which we experience time in terms of autobiographical memory. The second category of time is discussed, drawing on Augustine and Bergson amongst others. Bergson's notion of duration has been considered as a promising concept for a better understanding of autobiographical memory. Psychological phenomena such as autobiographical memory should embrace not only spatial dimension, but also a temporal dimension, in which a constant flow of irreversible time, where multiplicity, momentarily, dynamic stability and becoming and emergence of novelty can be observed.

Key words: autobiographical memory, time, duration, Augustine, Bergson

<h1>Metaphor in Memory Research</h1>

In the book *Metaphors we live by* (Lakoff and Johnson 1980), it is suggested that metaphors not only make our thoughts more vivid and interesting, but they actually structure our perceptions and understanding. Metaphors profoundly shape our views of life in the present and set up expectations for the future. Metaphors are not just a linguistic, but also a conceptual construction. Thus the metaphor archive for memory endorses a particular conception of memory, revealing the centrality of human action, behaviour and thinking in politics, culture and society studied in memory research across the academic disciplines. From the sheer volume of the coverage Brockmeier makes in his article (2010), the greater level of abstraction he makes to reach the core of the concept, with the more layers of metaphor are required to express the very complex abstraction of memory. In defining memory, we categorise and map out the layers and function of the thing called memory. It is in this sense that there is a far-reaching significance in the way Brockmeier reappraised memory studies and research. Most of our ordinary conceptual system (including memory) is metaphorical in nature (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980). This applies to memory researchers. The archive metaphor steers a particular approach, paradigm or a range of ways in which we think with memory research as human practice. This article is my attempt to drift

away from this conventionalisation of the archive as a spatial metaphor for memory and to consider the greater possibility of ‘time’ for conceptualising memory. The archive metaphor creates certain realities and ontology for researchers. Researcher’s construction of memory as a research object needs to be interrogated. Metaphor is an imaginative rationality, bringing together the reason and the imagination (Lakoff and Johnson); so far the archive metaphor only tells half of the story of memory.

Brockmeier (2010) assiduously paved the way forward in contemporary developments in memory research and mapped it brilliantly into four fields - the social and cultural, media and technology, the literary and artistic, the biological and neuroscience. It is a history of memory studies in the making. He makes a laudable contribution in two ways. Firstly, as a comprehensive survey, he helps us see past achievements by clearing the bushes in our paths of memory research and locating those milestones in the interwoven paths. Secondly, the survey helps us identify the next path forward, with which we come to see new directions in how the current achievement should be taken further. Brockmeier’s central aim is to show “that what we call memory is, like Ondaatje’s kaleidoscope, one of those tricky phenomena whose assumed material reality and our views about it cannot really be separated” (Brockmeier 2010, p. 7). He questions the popular idea of memory as storage, “the archive” of the past, although the archive metaphor has been influential in addressing what memory is and how it works from antiquity to the contemporary era. The storage metaphor of memory is still very dominant in contemporary academic disciplines such as experimental psychology and neuroscience, but as Brockmeier says, this story starts to collapse in the face of “the memory crisis” (p. 9). We have seen groundbreaking efforts and radical moves being made, departing from and challenging those traditions that monopolised memory research, including philosophy, psychology and neuroscience. The crisis created a new order and brought in fresh, new air to memory research in the 21st Century. But to whom is the crisis? Upon “the memory crisis” the field was laid open to those other researchers beyond the laboratory, to the world of living, becoming and transformation in human experience. Following Pierre Nora’s *lieux de memoire*, sites of memory, modern memory as archival storage relies on the mentality of the trace, the immediacy of the recording and the visibility of the image (Nora 1989).

<h2>The Archive Re-imagined </h2>

In recent years, despite this face-value use of the archive metaphor, there has been a renewed recognition of the archive as more than a physical entity. Derrida, for instance, interrogates the notion of archive, drawing on the etymology in Greek times and has traced the genealogy of archive to show how the archive was used in different times and cultures. Following Derrida, Carolyn Steedman (2001) recapitulates Derrida’s main argument and recast the meaning of the archive into a varied, perhaps more nuanced, role that was played out before the storage. Archive is more than a repository or record office. Archive is a derivative of the Greek word ‘*arkhe*’ as ‘a place things begin’ where power originates, its workings being inextricably bound up with the authority of beginnings and starting points’ (Steedman, 2001, p. 1). ‘For the archive: the fever not so much to enter it and use it, as to have it, or just for it to be there, in the first place’ (Steedman, 2001, p. 2). ‘Archive Fever’, the desire for the archive, is presented as part of the desire to find, or locate, or possess that moment of origin, as the beginning of things. Archive in this view functions as a place of authority marking in time its beginning and origin. Archive metaphor as it is re-

imagined by Derrida and Steedman, is relevant to autobiographical memory with an implied sense of the marking of a person's origin and beginning.

This link between the archive metaphor and autobiographical memory leads me to think why in the world do we think of people's lives as having a clear marking of their origins and beginning – the temporality of lives seems to be incorporated as a default feature of autobiographical memory. Certainly the autobiographical memory – the story of one's life, as a corporeal, finite living organism having a span of time which marks its beginning (birth) and its end (death) - works if we were only concerned about the content of what goes in the memory. However, this does not necessarily seem to be synonymous with understanding the temporal nature of human experience and its recollection and memory.

<h1>Reading Brockmeier</h1>

Writing about memory is fascinating and appeals to the heart and mind of an interdisciplinary audience, but the task is utterly daunting due to both its vastness and the ubiquity of the field. Clearly, we can agree that memory is impossible to define as a single object (Brockmeier 2010). It is “by nature multiple and yet specific; collective, plural, and yet individual” according to Nora (1989), capturing its complexity and indefinability by drawing on Maurice Halbwachs. Much of the contemporary memory studies are compartmentalised in binary oppositions-- individual vs group, private vs public, personal vs. social-collective, singular vs multiple, specific vs general. What is more, technological advancement, especially digital innovation within contemporary life, provides modalities and media, with which we are able to capture and replay one's experience of the here-and-now and share it with others at a global distance. Here, again and again, I come across a puzzle of time. It is time to take time seriously.

<h2>Place/site of Memory</h2>

What is this very taken for granted idea of the past, present and future? Indeed, when we refer to the present in commonsense language as being the here and now, this implies that the present entails time and place. I want to start with a place/spatial metaphor. In characterising memory research, that is complex and unfathomable, Nora labels memory as the *lieux* (places/sites) which are “mixed, hybrid, mutant, bound intimately with life and death, with time and eternity; enveloped in a Möbius strip of the collective and the individual, the sacred and the profane, the immutable and the mobile” (Nora 1989, p. 19). The strip holds a unity of opposites. He goes on to say:

“For if we accept that the most fundamental purpose of the lieu de memoire is to stop time, to block the work of forgetting, to establish a state of things, to immortalize death, to materialize the immaterial...all of this in order to capture a maximum of meaning in the fewest of signs, it is also, it is also clear that lieux de memoire only exist because of their capacity for metamorphosis, an endless of recycling of their meaning and an unpredictable proliferation of their ramification.” (Nora, 1989, p. 19)

As in the paradox of the archive in critical terms of Derrida (or Steedman), the material nature of memory in the sense of ‘lieu de memoire’ does not seem to stabilise

the past and to contain it. In order to gain a sense of a place, memory has to endure time. Perhaps the Möbius strip exemplifies the time dimension of memory.

Undoubtedly we can appreciate Brockmeier's competence in mapping the field as far as autobiographical memory is concerned. Yet Brockmeier pays least attention to the issue of time. Likewise, Nora, in making a distinction between memory and history, coins a term, the *lieux* (places) *de memoire*. Whether it is an archive or *lieux de memoire*, it emphasises the materiality of memory in a spatial sense. Both metaphors seem to defer a consideration of the concept of time or temporality. What comes "after archive" is rethinking time for memory. The concept of time is central to understanding the nature of human experience as a process in which a constant flux of change in organism, cultural and social practices is observed.

<h1>Rethinking time in autobiographical memory</h1>

Studies of autobiographical memory are abreast with those of human development. The concept of time cannot be overlooked when it comes to development over the individual life span. Commonsensically, we tend to look at development by physical time or clock time. For instance, birthdays mark developmental milestones. Academic achievement is assessed at the end of an academic year. As in spatialised notion of '*lieux de memoire*', we treat time as a measurement unit. We objectify and stabilise time in such a way in order to manipulate it as a factor in a causal model. Clock time underpins the experimental, causal paradigm as an important conceptual tool for the researcher's understanding of the research subject. As Valsiner suggests, "[m]ost of psychology is build on the non-developmental premises, utilizing representations of the 'object-like'... static explanations" (Valsiner 2000, p. 8). This approach fails to understand the state of development as *dynamic stability*. A phenomenon may "exist in a stable state, yet its stability is a result of constant dynamic processes that maintain that stability" (p. 8). Stability might be temporary – it may disappear and re-appear in a new form. As in most biographical, psychological and social systems, autobiographical memory can be considered to be in the permanent/constant process of change. To me, autobiographical memory shares this very characterisation of dynamic stability, in which change unfolds during an irreversible time. Valsiner elaborates that:

"[t]urning the irreversible time process into reversible units of time, these static description of time can be seen as examples of 'reversible time'. Continuous events can be turned discrete with specifiable 'end points' to experiences. By trying to measure time, the duration notion is lost and time becomes represented in ways similar to space... Time is irreversible as it flows, intricately linked with our experiencing our relations with our worlds." (Valsiner, 2000, p. 8)

Throughout intellectual history, but ostensibly in philosophy and physics, great thinkers have engaged in the concepts of time. According to Schatzki (Schatzki 2006), two categories of time dominated 20th century philosophy. The first includes such concepts as physical time, the time of objects in space, and the time of the world, or as Ramo's explanation, which refers to *chronos* (or *kronos*) in the Greek mythological conceptions of time. The second comprises human time, or lived time, or, better put, the time of experience or consciousness. Its Greek counterpart is *kairos*, meaning opportune time, the kind of time that does not sit on the linear temporality as in *chronos*. Murray addresses that time is a personal concept, it is through *chronos* that

we can share publicly the sense of time (Priestley 1964; Murray 2000). Referring to the two conceptions of time from his practice of working with people suffering from mental illness in the field of psychiatry, he characterises *kairos* as personally experienced time referring to “that rewarding involvement in life during which we lose the sense of time passing... Kairos is soul satisfying and soul nourishing” (Murray, 2000, p. 61).

According to O’hashi (Ohashi 2004) and Schatzki (2006), the first category of clock time is construed as a causal time paradigm, being traced back to Aristotle’s (1941: 219b1 cited in Schatzki 2006, p. 155) definition of time as “number of motion in respect to before and after” (Rämö 2002). For Aristotle, time cannot be conceived without motion and perceiving change. This echoes Valsiner’s critique on the current approach to study development non-developmentally in terms of measureable units of time. Time is objectified and represented in a linear model. This underpins autobiographical memory as archive, or storage, where past events are simply reproduced within the physical, clock time (O’hashi, 2004, pp. 21-23).

Meanwhile, the second category can be traced to the work of the distinguished philosopher-theologian St. Augustine (Augustine 1992 (400)). In Book 11 of St. Augustine’s *Confessions*, he ruminates on the nature of time, asking, “What then is time? Provided that no one asks me, I know. If I want to explain it to an inquirer, I do not know.” (Augustine, p. 230). Augustine’s time is a stark contrast to the Aristotelian causal time as a linear time line of succession of ‘instants’:

“It is now, however, perfectly clear that either the future nor the past are in existence... There are three times ---a present of things past, a present of things present, and a present of things future.” (cited in Schatzki 2006, p. 155).

Elusiveness of memory for Brockmeier may lie in the very puzzle of time: Augustine says “[n]either time past nor future, the present only, reality is” (XI: 11). “If no one asks me, I know what time is; if I want to explain it to him, I don’t know what time it is” (Augustine). Augustine’s soliloquy continues:

“For what is time? Who can easily and briefly explain it? Who even in thought can comprehend it, even to the pronouncing of a word concerning it? But what in speaking do we refer to more familiarity and knowingly than time? And certainly we understand when we speak of it; we understand also when we hear it spoken of by another. What, then, is time?” (Augustine, XI:11)

For Augustine, it is not the past that is memory, but “the present about the past”. O’hashi calls Augustinian past the act of remembering (O’hashi, 2000). This view of time seems to reflect the work of Fredrick Bartlett, in his famous studies of serial and repeated reproduction and the concept of schema (O’hashi, 2000). O’hashi argues that what we call memory should be considered as the act of remembering, that is a relational, situated generative social activity (and interaction) each time the event is remembered. This is different from memory conceived from the concept of Aristotelian time for memory, which is concerned with the accurate reproduction of the original event.

In focusing on the act of autobiographical remembering as a social and discursive action of telling, autobiographical memory is a time-related phenomenon. Whilst

clock time is operating, we need to focus on the psychological time, that Augustine refers to. Such consideration would give us further insight into the act of remembering/recollection, the way in which a storyteller makes meanings of the character's (including the person that 'tells') action and decisions. What may be useful for us from this thinking about time is to advance beyond a spatial understanding of time – by using metaphors such as archive, *lieux de memoire*, we have come to overlook that the experience is a phenomenon of duration.

Henri Bergson radically questioned the physical time at the turn of 20th Century. It is not surprising that Bergson's thinking about time was under-appreciated at the time given the fact that experimental psychology acquired its prominent status only in modern psychology (although Bergson's influence to William James, and vice versa, was well documented). In the late 20th Century, the work of Bergson has become revitalised with the help of Deleuze, who made Bergson in vogue again. Recently, critical psychologists (e.g., Middleton and Brown) followed suit, engaging his thoughts and conducting their critical re-analysis of the empirical work on memory and remembering. They too have helped us see the relevance of Bergson. It is on this basis that I now turn to Bergson's notion of duration (*la durée*), in extending *kronos* and Augustine's concept of time.

<h2>Duration: Time as undivided whole</h2>

To me, Bergson helps us see the scale of time differently, building on Augustine's notion of the past and the future in relation to the present. In examining the time of ongoing human activity such as memory, and acts of remembering and forgetting, linear time, independent from the world, presents us with a serious limitation. This refers to the central premise that everything is momentary.

Bergson disputed that separating out and describing these various on-going events is an accomplishment of memory: whereas memory records and virtually contains those on-going events (e.g., 1988, p. 151), thought leaps into memory and articulates these particular memories as recollections. On the contrary, Bergson claimed, in "*real time*... actions and perceptions form an *undivided whole*" (Bergson 1988, p. 138). Bergson defined duration as "the continuous progress of the past which gnaws into the future and wells as it advances" (1988, p. 150); it involves the past in its entirety, [being] prolonged into [the] present, and abid[ing] there, actual and active (1911, p. 15).

<h2>Duration: Elasticity of memory</h2>

Elsewhere, I have analysed narratives of redemption and reconciliation (Murakami 2007), drawing on positioning theory (Davies and Harré 1990; Harré and van Langenhove 1998). In hindsight, this analysis relies on 'positioning', which I recognise as a 'spatial' metaphor. Those storied events, being 'positioned' side by side in the telling are presented as an evidence of change. I argued that the contrasting ways in which the British veteran, Freddie, perceived, felt and acted toward Japanese people exemplified the veteran's discursive accomplishment of redemption and reconciliation. Clearly I overlooked the time dimension in my analysis. There is the time in between events. We can only speculate fuzziness, vagueness and messiness in the ways in which Freddie perceived, felt and made sense of his everyday life during the post-war years. There is a lot that is unaccounted for within Freddie's life in between those told events. Beyond this analysis, which made me understand the

nature of reconciliation as discursive accomplishment, it might be possible to apply Bergson's concept of duration to this discourse phenomenon. If we were to consider durational time as an elastic band, we can see the life of Freddie as elastic band, which stretches and un-stretches. Perhaps, it is because of the elasticity of time as duration that the narrative of redemption is made visible (to me, at least). Rather than thinking of the narrative as a strip of film or tape, which might be edited out and spliced, the act of remembering – the present telling of past events can be seen as an elastic band for the duration. Such experience of duration is elastic, whereas the flow of time is irreversible and indivisible.

According to Bergson, in the duration, there is no juxtaposition of events; therefore there is no mechanistic causality. The time between those storied events is the duration of which we can speak of “the experience of freedom” and might be construed as the zone of indeterminacy (Lawlor and Moulard 2008). Discourse analytic approach, although purporting to make visible variability and qualitative multiplicity in people's experiences, can enhance their viability of the approach by taking into consideration the second category of time as Bergson and his allies suggest. We can enquire further what we mean by qualitative multiplicity from a Bergsonian time perspective, that is “[i]n the duration, there is no juxtaposition of events; therefore there is no mechanistic causality. It is in the duration that we can speak of the experience of freedom” (Lawlor and Moulard, 2011, p. 5). This is very much in line with the indeterminacy of the past and the future as a developmental concept.

I hope to have illustrated that the above evaluation of the analysis, aided by positioning theory, highlights that the past is endured in the present by taking time as being of an elastic duration. Aligned with O'hashi, Middleton and Brown argue beyond the spatialised conception of experience. Again, this has an implication to the way we understand people's experience of time as not just a matter of passing moments (Middleton and Brown 2005). As Bergson argues, time is not simply a series of ‘instants’.

“Our continuity as beings comes from the undivided way in which we endure through time... Our thoughts and feelings do not fade as fleeting moments because time does not...break into tiny segments. Our duration is a continuous ‘gnawing of the past into the present,’ where the present is infused with the burden of a past that does not pass, does not escape us” (Middleton and Brown 2005, p, 224)

Bergson's view of duration as ‘unlimited experience’ according to Middleton and Brown resonates Ohashi's view of time based on his work on testimony and confessions. Perhaps, we can better understand not just memory, but all psychological phenomenon by taking ‘duration’ into an account.

<h2>River and Broom</h2>

So, in what ways is autobiographical memory qualitatively multiple? And constant in flux and momentary? We can see the archive metaphor falls short. Researchers (Sato, Hidaka et al. 2009; Sato and Valsiner 2010) pondered on this very question by metaphors of river and broom in theorising the trajectory of life in development. A broom of time is solid and flows like streams of a river, being bundled by some

practical, local situational order and communicative demands. Yet at the same time, we want to grasp the river-ness, a whole, of the autobiographical memory phenomena.

As for indeterminacy and multiplicity and variability of memory as well as the inseparable/indivisible sense of time, Bergson is in line with William James's view of reality and the constructed nature of recollection:

"I believe he would "have established the same relation as between the life we live every day and the life which actors portray in the evening on the stage. On the stage, each actor says and does only what has to be said and done; the scenes are clear-cut; the play has a beginning, a middle and an end; and everything is worked as economically as possible with a view to an ending which will be happy or tragic. But in life, a multitude of useless things are said, many superfluous gestures made, there are no sharply drawn situations; nothing happens as simply or as completely or as nicely as we should like; the scenes overlap; things neither begin nor end; there is no perfectly satisfying ending, nor absolutely decisive gesture, none of these telling words which give us pause: all the effects are spoiled. Such is human life. And such, no doubt, in James's eyes, is reality in general." (Bergson, 1946/1992, p. 210)

Relevance of the river metaphor for Bergson, aligned with James, is unmissable:

"To be sure, our experience is not in coherent...it shows us relationships between the things and connections between the facts: these relations are as real, as directly observable, according to William James, as the things and facts themselves. But the relations are fluctuating and things fluid. This is vastly different from that dry universe constructed by the philosophers with elements that are clear-cut and well-arranged, where each part is not only linked to another part, as experience shows us, but also, as our reason would have it, is coordinated to the whole. (1946/1992 pp. 210-211)

Bergson reflects on the "pluralism" of William James that:

"reality no longer appears as finite or as infinite, but simply as indefinite. It flows without our being able to say whether it is in a single direction, or even whether it is always and throughout the same river flowing." (Bergson, p. 211)

Along with other philosophers such as Heraclitus, who says "You cannot step out into the same river twice," Bergson catches our new imagination of time/duration as a river that constantly flows, Möbius strip or kaleidoscope whilst maintaining its wholeness. Memory has a characteristic of a unity of holding opposites and a constant flux of change.

<h1>Conclusion and Implications</h1>

In this article, I have reflected on Brockmeier (2010) and explored autobiographical memory from the point of view of time and duration. I started with an observation of time as a less considered, taken for granted concept in memory studies, whereas popular spatial references and metaphors of characterised and defined memory are profusely dominant. I then outlined two, classically different categories of time – Aristotelian and causal time. I am in full agreement with Brockmeier and other featured scholars in the Brockmeier forum (Echterhoff 2011; Mori 2011; Wertsch

2011) that we are in the post-archive era in terms of memory research. The archival model of memory assumes the physical, clock time, for examining human memory, seeking to stabilise and objectify human experience (such as remembering and forgetting) as an encoding, storage, organisation, and retrieval of life events in the measurable unit and span of time. I then ventured into the other category, Augustine's time, the Bergsonian time called 'duration (*la durée*)' and addressed its possibilities for memory studies in social sciences. Surely, there are a number of implications in reconsidering autobiographical memory in terms of Bergson's duration. This sheds light into the way in which autobiographical memory and its telling can be studied as creative/generative acts in life, in an open ecological system, where humans and nature, mind and matter are inseparable dynamic relations to a constitute wholeness.

Although this conclusion might have been well rehearsed in much of CAP and other critical psychology journals over the last decade or so, it is a worthwhile reminder that indeterminacy, complexity, multiplicity and ambiguity are important features of human psychological (memory) phenomena of time and experience. Psychology, with recent development in social and cultural psychology, can leave room for other ways of thinking about memory by considering time/duration as an underpinning concept in the process that captures the ephemeral as well as the enduring features of the meaning making in a given environment and culture in embodied social interactions.

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